



In Touch South India

Headlines from the U.S. Consulate General Chennai



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Religion in the United States

It may seem paradoxical that a nation that built “a wall of separation between Church & State” (words written by Thomas Jefferson in 1802) is among the most religious on earth. America’s Founding Fathers shared the revolutionary belief that one’s civil and political rights should not be linked to one’s religious practices. Without an officially sanctioned religion, there resulted a thriving marketplace of religious ideas, along with greater tolerance and diversity. This history suggests that religion prospers when government leaves it alone.

On March 12, the Consulate General hosted a series of roundtable discussions on religion in the United States, highlighting the country’s increasing religious diversity. In welcoming guests from Chennai-area colleges and universities, Consul General David Hopper said: “Like India, the United States is a large, multi-religious democracy where the Constitution requires that the state stay out of religion and not prefer one religion over another. And also like India, we have found strength in our diversity. It helps us understand the world better and understand ourselves better. It adds to the cultural richness of the nation.”

One of the eight American panelists, Information Management Specialist Abdillahi Yassin, an immigrant from Somalia who settled in Minnesota, acknowledged that there can be occasional friction between religious groups. He noted that in Min-

nesota and in communities throughout the United States, there are interfaith organizations that provide a formal way for people of different religions to bridge differences and understand one another. He said: “In this way, we demystify our neighbor’s religion and promote tolerance and mutual respect.”

Along with Mr. Yassin, a Muslim, Americans of Jewish and Hindu background and a follower of Buddhism described their experiences as minorities in a country that is predominantly Christian. Panelists answered questions about the legal framework for religious liberty in the United States, and they did not shy away from a frank and open discussion of the so-called hot-button issues where religion and politics intersect, such as prayer in public schools and the teaching of evolution.

Few issues involving religious belief and public life are resolved with finality; they keep cropping up in slightly altered form.

But there are certain enduring principles, one of which was expressed by President George Washington in a letter to the Jewish community of the state of Rhode Island. “The Government of the United States,” he wrote, “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance... Every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.” What Washington expressed so simply and eloquently is that people of all faiths have a home in the United States.



Consulate officers Kris Fresonke and Brian Simmons respond to questions about the interplay of religion and the U.S. elections.

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Consulate main web link:

<http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>

Other links:

<http://americanlibrary.in.library.net>

<http://www.unitedstatesvisas.gov>

<http://buyusa.gov/india>

Consulate Phone Number:

044-2857-4000

Consulate Fax Number:

044-2811-2020



As always is the case, this edition of *In Touch South India* highlights a number of the Consulate’s efforts, led by our Public Affairs Section, to engage with people and organizations in South India. Our goals are to tell America’s story and to listen to the concerns and interests of the people we meet. In addition to the many programs the Consulate initiates, we also are pleased to receive invitations from institutions and organizations and we accept as many as possible. My activities during a recent week offer a good sample: I represented USAID at the launch of a program aimed at stopping discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS. I attended the dedication of a health care center funded by KPMG India for the people of the tsunami-affected villages around Palaverkadu, north of Chennai. At the University of Madras I helped present awards to the winners of a speaking competition about HIV/AIDS. I was honored to be Chief Guest the annual College Day at the Mohamed Sathak College of Arts and Science in Sholinganallur. And I participated in the UNFPA-Laadli Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity at the Music Academy. We welcome such opportunities, and we look forward to many more.

-David T. Hopper, Consul General

Chennai Students Chat with Nick Burns

On February 22, U.S. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns discussed the implications of Kosovo's independence with journalists, students, and average citizens from 60 countries around the world in his first-ever Webchat. He answered 30 questions in the hour-long event, including two questions from 9th graders of Veera Savarkar School in Chennai.



Mr. Murali, Veera Savarkar School, Chennai webchatting with Nick Burns

Q (Murali, a student): Respected Under Secretary, would you like India to support U.S.A. on Kosovo?

A (Burns): Yes. We hope that India will support Kosovo. India is a great friend of the U.S. I have made eight trips there in

the last three years. While we do not agree on all issues, we certainly both support democracy and peace.

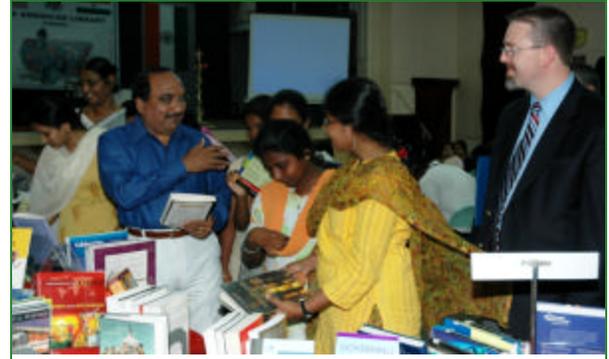
Q (Murali): What is your advice to students to learn from the Kosovo conflict?

A (Burns): That peace and stability depend on goodwill and understanding. We believe Kosovo will become a respected member of the international community.

Under Secretary Burns concluded the Webchat by telling the participants: "I greatly enjoyed this, and hope you will be a frequent visitor to our Website, www.America.gov"

American Library Visits Madurai

Continuing the celebration of its "60 Years of Service in South India," the American Library organized a traveling exhibition in Madurai February 26-28. Lady Doak College hosted the exhibition, and we were honored to have Mr. S.S. Jawahar, District Collector of Madurai, and a user of the Library during his student days in Chennai, inaugurate the exhibition. In his address, he urged students and others to make use of the American Library, noting: "A great library contains the diary of humanity."



Mr. S.S. Jawahar, District Collector of Madurai, and Consul Information Officer Wesley Robertson mingle with readers

The overall theme of the exhibition was a celebration of both Black History Month and Women's History Month. The program included book displays, film screenings, as well as discussions and lectures on a variety of topics. The two-day exhibition attracted nearly 2,500 students, academics, government officials, media representatives and legal professionals from the Madurai area.

Positive Images



Captions are for photos starting from the upper left and going clockwise

Caption 1: Ambassador Mulford, with Mrs. Mulfurod and others looking on, plants a sapling in front of the Paigah Palace, soon to be the U.S. Consulate Hyderabad.

Caption 2: Former Chief Election Commissioner T.S. Krishnamurthy, Consul General David Hopper, Mayor of San Antonio, Texas, Phil Hardberger, and Vice Chancellor of University of Madras S. Ramachandran. Mayor Hardberger later signed a Sister City Agreement with the city of Chennai. (Photo credit: The Hindu)

Caption 3: Director of the American Library—Chennai M.K. Jagadish dedicating the library's new circulation desk.



Corporate Social Responsibility

With the increase in wealth in India's private sector over the past 15 years, the idea that corporations can and should contribute to the country's social development through corporate social responsibility (CSR) is gathering steam. However,

there are barriers to collaboration between the for-profit and non-profit sectors, including different operating models and procedures. The Consulate, in conjunction with the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce



Vidya Reddy, of Tulir pins an anti-violence ribbon on Consul General David Hopper.

(IACC), sought to break down some of these barriers by bringing potential donors and recipients together in a day-long seminar on February 22. The Taj Group generously provided the venue for the event.

Participants in the seminar included nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media, business and academia as well as representatives from smaller companies that may not have well-established CSR programs and multinationals who are recent investors in India and may need guidance in setting up an India-based CSR program. After the initial presentations, corporate participants toured stalls set up by 30 NGOs from across Tamil Nadu representing a wide range of issues including literacy, child abuse, human rights, HIV/AIDS, environment, and cultural preservation.

While the focus of the event was not to raise funds, over 1,25,000 rupees in CSR donations were committed during the event and the IACC announced the formation of an IACC-CSR fund. The event concluded with a special workshop for NGO participants by the head of the Cognizant Foundation who provided useful tips on how NGOs should approach corporations for funding and support. The Consulate plans to hold similar events in each of the four states of South India.

Consular Corner:

Plan Ahead

Imagine getting to the airport for your long-awaited family vacation to the United States and, as you're checking in, being informed that your child's passport expired a week ago. Or perhaps it's your visa that's no longer valid. In both of these situations, your carefully planned trip will be delayed while you frantically pursue new travel documents.

With summer and school holidays approaching, now is the perfect time to begin early planning for your travels to the United States. Whether you need a new visa or passport, taking a few moments and checking some details now can save you headaches in the near future.

For American citizens, or their parents, please be aware that the normal processing time for a renewal passport is about two weeks. Passports are not printed at the Consulate, but rather in the United States, and no expedited service is available.

Individuals needing non-immigrant visas should also plan ahead. While there are plenty of appointments available, demand can change quickly. There is no requirement that you travel soon after your visa interview, so go ahead and schedule an interview well before your travel dates. While we are sympathetic that you may have travel planned the day after your visa interview, we cannot guarantee that the visa will be available in just one day, and in some cases extra processing may be required.

Indian passport holders are also encouraged to check the expiration dates on their passports; you'll need at least six months validity remaining to get a visa. In addition, check your passport closely for damage to the biographical page. In some instances the Consulate may ask you to have a seriously damaged passport replaced before a visa is issued.

The Consulate knows that summer travel season is important to both American and Indian citizens. We hope these tips will help in your planning for leisure or business travel. We look forward to serving you at the Consulate and helping you make that dream vacation a reality!

What We Read

Frederick J. Kaplan
Consul for Public Affairs

The Guide
by R.K. Narayanan

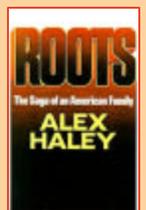
Somewhere along the railway line between Madras and Trichy lies the fictional town of Malgudi, the setting of some dozen novels by R.K. Narayan. In this town of textile mills and a Robert Clive statue, shopkeeper Raju moonlights as a tour guide and gets into trouble with a married woman. Happenstance seems to rule Raju's life, and sincerity and meaning elude him completely. After a spell in prison, the only period in his life during which he finds some contentment, he ends up in a village by a river and becomes, without any intention, desire, effort or qualifications, a holy man.



Paul A Hinshaw
Vice Consul

Roots
by Alex Haley

The Saga of an American Family traces one family's heritage across three hundred years and two continents to its origins in The Gambia. Published in 1976, the book ignited Americans' interest in their own genealogies. *Roots* recounts a young boy's abduction in The Gambia in 1767, his arrival as a slave to the British colonies, and his progeny's unbreakable family bond in the face of adversity throughout ensuing generations. *Roots* shines a light on the American experience from the point of view of an enslaved family as it struggles to stay together and attain the full promise of the American Dream.



The Writer's Trade

The celebrated American author Paul Theroux was in Bangalore and Chennai February 13-16 to meet with fellow readers and writers. In a workshop he gave for budding, unpublished writers, one young woman asked him, with his monumental production of 43 books and countless book reviews and essays, whether he has time to revise his work. Mr. Theroux replied by explaining that he writes his books in their entirety in longhand four or five times and only then types the final version. He said that writing slowly allows him to write well. Parts of his manuscripts, like the first paragraph of the recently-published collection of novellas, "The Elephanta Suite," might be rewritten 20 times.



Writer Paul Theroux

The seminar participants raised the difficulties they confront as writers, like how to render into English a dialogue that is imagined in Malayalam and still convey the nuance of the original. Mr. Theroux, unable to provide a pat answer, noted that writing is a problem-solving endeavor and that writers must experiment to see what works and what doesn't. He said that Indian writers had the advantage of knowing more than one language and being able to tap into a rich cultural legacy.

Later speaking to a large crowd in a Chennai bookstore, Mr. Theroux recalled that the ponds of his home state of Massachusetts supplied ice to Madras nearly two centuries ago. That ice, carried from Boston in the straw-lined holds of ships, was stored in the Madras Ice House, now Vivekanandar Illam, which Mr. Theroux made a point of visiting. Writing in 1847, Massachusetts philosopher Henry David Thoreau, a reader of the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana, was excited by the thought that the water of his beloved Walden Pond, carved up in winter and transported in frozen form to Madras, might later be "mingled with the sacred waters of the Ganges."

Thoreau seldom traveled and never very far. Mr. Theroux, on the other hand, has been everywhere and continues to travel. In fact, he recently repeated a trip he took across Europe and Asia in the early 1970s and wrote about in "The Great Railway Bazaar." Why this wanderlust? It is not, Mr. Theroux assured us, to see the Louvre or the Taj Mahal, but "to discover the human architecture, the complexity of people and their relationships, and to write about how my life and destiny, like the waters of Walden and the Ganges, are mingled with yours."

South Asian Americans and the U.S. Elections

On March 25th, as part of a series of programs on the U.S. Presidential elections, the Consulate and the Asian College of Journalism organized a digital video conference with Ms. Deepa Iyer, Executive Director of South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) and Dr. V.K. Padmanabhan, Professor of Political Science at the University of Madras.

In her presentation Ms. Iyer said that the South Asian American community is extensively involved in the political process — as voters, activists, fund-raisers and lobbyists. Presidential candidates have taken note and are reaching out to the community, which regards immigration as a hot topic.



Journalism students participate in the Consulate's digital video conference.

South Asian American politicians have made their mark in different parts of the country like Maryland, Ohio, Iowa and New Jersey where they serve in state legislatures. The best known politician of South Asian origin today is Bobby Jindal, recently elected Governor of Louisiana.

Dr. Padmanabhan said that the involvement of the South Asian diaspora in the U.S. elections has a positive impact on policies important to India.

From Page to Stage

The setting was the stately and historic Senate House of the University of Madras. The words were from the timeless poetry of Maya Angelou, Denise Levertov and Elizabeth Bishop, among others, and from the novel "Sula" by Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. And the readings and enactments were by the students of "Curtain Call," the theater wing of the University of Madras.

The unforgettable afternoon of March 11 was organized jointly by the United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) and the Department of English, University of Madras, to mark International Women's Day and Women's History Month. Employing the words of some America's leading women writers and poets, the performers gave voice to the anguish, disillusionment, hope and resilience of women everywhere. Dr. Kris Fresonke, Vice Consul and a former American Fulbrighter, and Ms. Geetha Ganga, a former Indian Fulbrighter, led a discussion after the performances to explore how women writers, "coming out from the cold," have transformed literature with their distinct voices.